



Education and Resentment

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Abstract

That the world is awash with resentment poses a genuine question for educators. Here, we will suggest that resentment can be better harnessed for good if we stop focusing on people and tribes and, instead, focus on systems: those invisible norms that often produce locked-in structures of social interaction. A “systems lens” is vast, so fixes will have to be an iterative process of reflection, and revision toward a more just system. Nonetheless, resentment toward the status quo may be an important element in keeping that otherwise tedious process going, with the caveat that resentment is only productive when it is combined with reason, and that, therefore, educators, rather than privileging *participant reactive attitudes*, ought, instead, to promote *participant reactive reasoning*, as the latter can be a genuine force for both personal and interpersonal growth, while the former might very well do the reverse.

Keywords: resentment in the classroom, tribalism, shaming, systemic lens, participant reactive attitudes, participant reactive reasoning.

“True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”¹

Martin Luther King

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https://www.reddit.com/r/quotes/comments/16ynd4/true_compassion_is_more_than_flinging_a_coin_to_a/

From his 1967 book *Beyond Vietnam*.

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- Dealing with resentment in education.
- Shaming is counterproductive.
- Resenting the system instead of people and tribes.
- Participant reactive reasoning instead of participant reactive attitudes.

1. Introduction

In his now famous paper *Freedom and Resentment* (2005), Peter Strawson makes the case that we “mark” the freedom of others by evaluatively-tinged “participant reactive attitudes,” such as resentment (p. 8). Strawson contrasts participant reactive attitudes with what he refers to as an “objective attitude” (p. 8). According to Strawson, “to adopt the objective attitude to another human being is to see him, perhaps, as an object of social policy; as a subject for what, in a wide range of sense, might be called treatment; as something (. . .) to be managed or handled or cured or trained” (p. 9).

Though Strawson’s goal was to show that the human commitment to participant reactive attitudes rendered a belief in pan-determinism virtually impossible, for many, the ultimate value of Strawson’s argument was its implicit endorsement of an attitude that, heretofore, many considered negative, i.e., resentment. Since it signals that the resenter views the resented as free, surely, resentment is a good thing.

But is it?

Certainly, the world is awash with resentment: women against men; non-whites against whites; indigenous people against colonizers; LGBTQ folks against cisgender, straight folks; the poor against the rich; the young against the old; the Catholics against the Protestants; the Muslims against Jews; the Shia against the Sunni; the Tutsis against the Hutus—the list goes on.

So, if one is alive, one cannot help but bump up against resentment. For educators, this poses a genuine question. How should educators handle resentment? Should they ignore the elephant in the room? Should they put a halo around resentment as the right and proper attitude to adopt if one feels victimized? Should they view resentment as an impediment to personal flourishing and as such attempt to deconstruct it?

These are the questions that will be tackled here. We will begin by a brief overview of the natural roots of tribalism and the inevitable inter-tribal attitudes of resentment that it fosters. On the assumption that the human species would be better off without the negative impact of tribalism (e.g., war, oppression, etc.), we will then briefly analyze the degree to which shaming the “winner” might or might not move us toward the goal of pan-human peace.

We will then suggest that resentment can be better harnessed for good if we stop focusing on people and tribes and, instead, focus our energy on systems, i.e., those invisible assumptions, rules, and norms that often produce locked-in structures of social interaction. We will argue that a ‘systems lens’ is inevitably vast and that, therefore, we need to get comfortable with the fact that fixes for that system must be an iterative process of reflection, and revision toward an ever more just system, with amelioration of the worst-off being a priority (Rawls, 1972), but that, nonetheless, resentment toward the status quo may be an important element in keeping that otherwise tedious process going. Finally, we will argue that it is only in combination with reason that resentment has the freedom-producing qualities that Strawson suggests, and that, therefore, educators, rather than cushioning or privileging *participant reactive attitudes*, ought, instead, to promote *participant reactive reasoning*, as the latter can be a genuine force for both personal and interpersonal growth, while the former might very well do the reverse.

2. Tribalism, though natural, is problematic

All homo sapiens are born with the proclivity to divide those they meet into “us” and “them,” a fact supported by a vast amount of evidence in Joshua Greene’s book *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them* (2014). Greene argues that this finding should not be surprising, as tribalism affords humans a giant evolutionary advantage. Since evolution is inherently competitive, being able to see *some* others as members of my tribe, opens up the possibility of *within-group cooperation* in an effort to *outcompete* members of other tribes. In other words, biologically speaking “humans were designed for cooperation, *but only with some people*. Our moral brains evolved for cooperation *within groups*” (p. 23). Cooperation evolved, in other words, not because it is “nice,” but because it confers individuals a survival advantage. “And thus, insofar as morality is a biological adaptation, it evolved not only as a device for putting Us ahead of Me, but as a device for putting Us ahead of Them” (p. 24).²

Despite its biological basis, however, Greene recognizes that tribalism in our overcrowded world is threatening the overall welfare of the human species; as Greene writes, “Today, our most formidable enemy is ourselves” (p. 348). Greene thus argues that, in order to combat this natural tendency to see those of other tribes as enemies, we must seriously engage in the sort of “slow thinking,” suggested by Daniel Kahneman (2011), in order to move beyond our natural intuitive tendencies to divide one another into groups. We must think instead in terms of a “metamorality” that recognizes that we humans (if not all living things on planet earth) are on the same team (Greene, 2014: 345). His hope is that we create a global tribe—not to gain advantage—but simply because it is good (p. 353). Or, one might add, thinking of all of humans as being the same team is necessary for our combined welfare.

David Brooks, in his book *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* (2019) also makes the plea that we ought to dampen down our tendency to cluster into tribes. Thus, he argues that “Tribalists seek out easy categories in which some people are good and others are bad. They seek out certainty to conquer their feelings of unbearable doubt” (p. 35). And he goes on to point out that tribal ties are not the same as the bonds of community. “Community is connection based on mutual affection. Tribalism. . . is connection based on mutual hatred. Community is based on common humanity; tribalism on a common foe.” Brooks describes tribalism as “a community for lonely narcissists” and that, these days, partisanship for many people is not about which political party has better policies, but picking sides between “the saved and the damned” (p. 35).

3. But intertribal resentment seems justified

Our tendency to identify as a member of a group and attempt to outcompete other groups prime us to be *resentful* of groups that threaten, or outcompete our own group, whether those groups are historical or presently active. As such, any person advocating for pan-human cooperation and/or connection needs to first recognize and figure out how to deal with the emotional warfare that arises as the inevitable result of the present or past inequity that exists between various groups.

Resentment has been a focus of many philosophers. Strawson, as mentioned earlier (2005) argued that as humans, we cannot help but display “participant reactive attitudes,” such

² Henri Tajfel (1982), famous for his Social Identity Theory, also highlights how group membership has evolved to be an important part of individuals’ sense of self-worth and self-esteem. Our innate desire to be part of a group leads to stereotyping, i.e., both the exaggeration of the differences between groups or the exaggeration of the similarities between those within a group.

as resentment, toward perceived transgressions, nor should we! Strawson's thesis is that participant reactive attitudes are critical to maintaining functional human relationships, as they keep the human commitment to freedom (and therefore responsibility) alive. It is precisely by being resentful of another's inconsiderate or vicious behavior that one testifies to the fact that one believes that the other is free to do otherwise. To feel nothing would be to see the other as incapable of controlling their behavior. That is, it would be to see the other as merely a determined object among other determined objects in the world, such as atoms or many nonhuman animals.

Following Strawson's lead, Jeffrie Murphy, in his article "Forgiveness and Resentment" (1982), argues that resentment signifies that one views a perpetrator of a perceived harm as responsible and so, in that sense, shows respect for the other by viewing them as a moral agent (p. 505). Amplifying the message, Katie Stockdale, argues in support of the notion of "collective resentment" (2013), that, even if one has not oneself suffered harm, it is legitimate to feel resentment on behalf of a group that has suffered systematic harms. She uses as her prime example indigenous resentment toward what she refers to as "settler Canadians." Stockdale also quotes Glen Coulthard, who argued, during a public talk at the University of British Columbia in 2011, that resentment is a pathway to self-determination that moves away from Indigenous peoples' dependency on the actions of colonizers for freedom and self-worth. The underlying message here seems to be that resentment is the antithesis of what settler Canadians want or hope for from Indigenous groups, so resentment not only signifies the independence of Indigenous people; it simultaneously serves as a prod for settlers to change their ways. After all, no one likes to be resented!

All in all, then, there seems to ample philosophical support for holding onto resentment either when one has oneself suffered harm, or when harm has been directed toward the group of which one is a member. However, if this is the case, then this will serve as emotional energy to reinforce tribal walls—something that would seem antithetical to our collective wellbeing and progress towards a unified world.

4. Changing attitudes towards winners

There has always been inter-tribal conflict, however our attitudes towards winners and losers have shifted dramatically over the years, in a way not dissimilar to that described by Nietzsche in the *Genealogy of Morals* (2017).

The great conquerors in history were, and to many still are, seen as just that—*great*: Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Attila the Hun, Charlemagne, Thutmose III (Pharaoh of Egypt), Ch'in Shih Huang (China), Julius Caesar, and so on. Winning was good or at least neutral; losing—well, that was bad.

In contemporary society, who wins and who loses seems to be more a function of one's place in a complex social system, rather than as a result of individual excellence. Thus, for instance, it is abundantly clear that quality education is a necessary condition for anyone to compete in the socio-economic sphere. However, *quality* education is only readily available to tribal members who continue to benefit from perpetual advantage, i.e., those born into wealthy (often White) families³. Moreover, structural impediments stand in the way of those whose tribal descriptives hamper equal consideration in socioeconomic advancement, e.g., women, gays, Blacks, etc.

As a consequence of this systemic view, modern winners, instead of being inheritors of the attitudinal mantels of Alexander the Great or Napoleon, are resented as fraudulent in some sense. That is, these modern winners are perceived to be basking in benefits that were showered

³ Of contemporary American education, Hughs (1993) notes that "disadvantaged students receive a basic education that is shockingly inferior to white ones" (p. 61).

upon them by luck. ⁴And this attitudinal switch, in which winners are viewed negatively, is seen by many as essential to the work of making the system which we occupy a fairer one.⁵

But is this a good thing?

Is shaming those who may have benefited from the system or who may continue to benefit from the system the best way, or even a justified way, to move toward a more equitable world? Does fanning the flames of resentment move us closer to the possibility of a pan-tribal humanity?

5. Is shaming the “winners” a strategy for change?

There are many in academia who, either implicitly or explicitly, adhere to the opinion that shaming the “winners” is a necessary condition for systemic change. Peggy McIntosh, in her article “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (1989), begins with a plea that we all ought to put on our “social system lens” so that we see clearly the relatively stable trajectories of groups as a function of skin color (the correlation between white skin and higher socio-economic level), gender (women carry a disproportional role in child-rearing), specific racial histories (slavery) and ingrained cultural imperatives (e.g., whether books are cherished in a household).

However, McIntosh goes on to make the case that (i) privilege be viewed in *zero-sum terms*, and (ii) that it is essential that people who are privileged *feel guilty*.

With regard to (i) that privilege is a *zero-sum* phenomenon, McIntosh says that while a lot of people “may say they will work to improve women’s status, in the society, the university, or the curriculum, but they cannot or will not support the idea of lessening men’s” (p. 1). And elsewhere, with regard to race, she says “In proportion as my racial group was being confident, comfortable, and oblivious, other groups were likely being made unconfident, uncomfortable, and alienated” (p. 3).⁶

And with regard to (ii) the notion that *feeling* guilt is important, she faults her schooling for giving her “no training in seeing myself as an oppressor” (p. 1). And that “I have met very few men who are truly distressed about systemic, unearned male advantage and conferred dominance” (p. 3).

Kevin Kumashiro (2000) goes even further in his paper “Toward a Theory of Anti-Oppressive Education” by making the case that everyone but a subset of white males is oppressed, thus placing this subset in the bull’s eye of others’ resentment. Specifically, he says that

⁴ There are exceptions to this rule. Many individuals still accrue power and prestige through impressive personal endeavours, such as Bill Gates or Jeff Bezos.

⁵ Some authors trace the seeds of this switch back to the moral systems arising from Christianity. In his books *The Antichrist*, and *The Genealogy of Morals*, Friedrich Nietzsche argued that Christianity sparked a “transvaluation of values”, that eventually led to the elevation and celebration of weakness and suffering and the condemnation of strength and vitality. Nietzsche contended that the moral system that flowed from Christianity was misanthropic at its roots. That is, in its effort to protect the weak, this moral system ironically began to venerate weakness itself, and condemn the good things possessed by the powerful, such as *laissez faire* sexuality, a long life and wealth, i.e., instead of empowering the weak, it demanded that people be ashamed of their flourishing.

⁶ Similar sentiments have been echoed in fields other than education. In a famous blog article “Get Out the Way” published on the American Mathematical Society’s website, Piper Harron (2017) asks white, cisgender males to vacate their jobs or take a demotion in order to create space in STEM fields for marginalized parties.

... the majority of students—namely, all those who are not White American, male, hegemonically masculine, heterosexual, and middle-class or wealthy, are marginalized and harmed by various forms of oppression in schools (p. 29).

And in an earlier passage, Kumashiro includes the descriptives “Christian” and “English-speaking” (p. 26).

But look what is happening here. These messages are clear attempts at “essentializing” (Gopnik, 2019: 178) the oppressor group: that everyone in the group is essentially the same and hence legitimate targets of resentment. But is this legitimate? While one may be justified in feeling resentment toward the white male Koch brothers, who indeed seem to be using their vast wealth to solidify their privilege, does it make sense to shine that same emotive light on the white males in a grade one class room—or in any classroom, for that matter. Thus, though Kumashiro says “Educators have a responsibility to make schools into places that are fair, and that attempt to teach to all their students” (p. 29), it is clear that he means that we all ought to jump on board the effort to down-rank⁷ white heterosexual males, while “up-ranking” everyone else. If this is the case, then this flies in the face of Kumashiro’s claim that educators ought to be fair and teach to *all* students. Instead, Kumashiro appears to be valorising the resentment of white, male, middle-class, Christian, English-speaking students.⁸

6. Is shaming the “winners” an impediment to change?

Tribal feuds are frequently characterized as a zero-sum phenomenon: either our tribe gets to keep this land, this treasure, this status, or yours does. Warfare of all stripes continues unabated on this very assumption. In such situations, emotional flaming is useful for energizing and consolidating one’s forces. The Jews are vermin; the Tutsis are cockroaches; the gang controlling the next block are...etc.

For those who believe that warfare between human tribes is inevitable, this fanning the flames of resentment is not only natural, it is a good thing. Others, however, believe that this natural resentment ought to be kept under control,⁹ and if possible, discouraged—especially given the better dialogical tools at modern humans’ disposal.¹⁰

Thus, Martha Nussbaum (2016) argues, in her book *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice*, that anger is conceptually confused and normatively pernicious; that it assumes that the suffering of the wrongdoer restores the thing that was damaged, but that, in fact, it betrays an all-too-lively interest in one’s *relative* status by humiliating the other. At their core, she argues that anger and resentment are at the same time infantile and harmful.

⁷ Nussbaum (2016: 29).

⁸ Though Kumashiro’s suggestion that educators constantly look to the margins (p. 31) seems to be common-sense, what happens when, in this changing world, it is the young white male students who exists at the margin (as is the case in a prestigious private school in Canada in which, of a grade 1 class, less than 10% were white males). Is it these 2 or 3 students whom the teacher should unmask and make visible the privilege of their identities (Kumashiro, 2000: 37) and strive to help them acknowledge and work against their own privilege and their sense of being the “norm” (p. 35) so that can achieve a kind of self-reflexivity (p. 36) that will lead them to self-transformation (p. 44), and so that they see the other as an equal (p. 45)? What would such an education look like that focuses on these 2 or 3 students in contrast to the other 30 or so others?

⁹ See Anderson and Gardner (2019), which echoes much of what is to follow.

¹⁰ As Einstein has been purported to have said, “I do not know with what weapons WWIII will be fought, but WWIV will be fought with sticks and stones.”

Nussbaum's major theme is "Deweyan" in the sense that it is grounded in the belief that *all of us* have the responsibility to try to develop ways to live together in a manner that is potentially beneficial to all. As such, we *all* need to be part of a dialogical process of equal participants who come together in an honest and open attempt to articulate a common future. Treating others as likely criminals is just about the worst way to begin if you want someone to cooperate as an equal (Nussbaum, 2016: 243).

Nussbaum recognizes how the thoughts of "payback" can be intensely satisfying; she even quotes Aristotle's comment that thoughts of retribution are pleasant (p. 17). Nonetheless, we all need to recognize that attempting to reverse the positions through "*down-ranking*" does nothing in the journey to create equality (p. 29).

Echoing this sentiment is the work of Philip Pettit (1996). In his article "Freedom as Antipower," Pettit asks, "how might we guard the powerless against subjugation by the powerful? One way would be to reverse roles, of course, and give them power over others rather than letting others have power over them. But that would only relocate the problem, not resolve it" (p. 588). And Donna Hicks (2011) similarly argues that while playing the victim card is tempting, it should be avoided. Thus, she says:

The temptation to see the other person as the perpetrator and oneself as the innocent victim is one of the greatest obstacles to resolving conflict in relationships. Our need to be both right and done wrong by is an outdated survival strategy that creates big problems for us today (p. 143).

Yet another problematic aspect of shaming the winner is that victimizers are often perceived as powerful and victims as powerless, which may be precisely how shaming really harms, namely that victims have their sense of agency diminished.

Even Pablo Freire, whose *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) can be read as condemnatory of oppressors and eulogistic of victims, points out that no pedagogy can be truly liberating if it treats the oppressed as unfortunates for three reasons: (a) it suggests that the oppressed emulate the oppressors (p. 54); (b) that that guilt is a kind of self-glorification—that one is royalty of infamy (p. 34); and (c) that playing the victim is often used as a shield against judgment and hence the self-development that accrues through growth-inspiring feedback (p. 124).

And, in her paper "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities" (2009), Eve Tuck, an American indigenous scholar, builds on this idea when she argues that research focused on highlighting a group's victimization, which she labels "Damage-Centered Research," ultimately does a disservice to those who are deemed to be victims. Tuck argues that the language surrounding these approaches risks portraying members of these groups as objects damaged beyond-repair, thus crippling these groups' attempts to rise above their conditions.¹¹

Still, the central question remains unanswered: If people are harmed, is it not our job to blame and punish the perpetrators?

In answering this question, we suggest that we adopt a more honest and reasoned view of the notion of perpetrator. Just as "winners" are no longer revered since their position is no longer viewed as function of their own agency, so we suggest that, for the very same reason, it makes no sense to view them as culpable. We suggest, in other words, that the reframing of this question can lead to a more productive outcome: if it indeed is a system of invisible assumptions,

¹¹ This point is also echoed by Schein and Gray (2018) as well as de Beauvoir (2011). It is for this reason that Nietzsche writes, in his book *The Antichrist* (1895), "If I must pity, at least I do not want it known; and if I do pity, it is preferably from a distance."

rules and norms that perpetrate lingering injustice, is it not our job to change the system so it is more just?

We suggest that the answer is “yes,” and that we ought to be educating so that, in the face of injustice, individuals are more inclined to adopt a systemic rather than individual or tribal focus, that plans for action be laid out in small steps that are amenable to continuous evaluation and change, and that resentment, an inevitable and indeed valuable reaction to injustice be repurposed for good by harnessing it to reason.

7. Refocusing and repurposing resentment

Focusing on changing the system has four distinct merits:

- (1) It holds more promise for ameliorating the problem than simply rewarding or penalizing individual players within a flawed game.
- (2) It is inevitably forward looking, in contrast to the retrospective focus of responsabilizing people.
- (3) It is a great equalizer (winners and losers are perceived to be equally products of and potential agents within the system).
- (4) It helps to diminish the kind of interpersonal contempt that can destroy the possibility of working together.

Let us deal briefly with each of these in turn.

- (1) A systemic lens holds more promise for remedying injustice.

With his seminal book, *Suicide*, originally published in 1897, Emile Durkheim offered an entirely different perspective through which human behavior ought to be evaluated by providing extensive evidence to show that suicide rates varied as a function of “social facts” (e.g., group cohesion) rather than being merely as a function of individual psychological attributes. This “sociological” lens has been highly instrumental in changing the hitherto well-established disparaging views of marginalized groups such as women, people of color, and the poor.

Through this sociological lens, many have come to understand that the less advantaged state of these marginalized individuals was more a function of “systemic drivers” than personal deficiencies. The implicit assumption tied to this perspective is that, if the goal is to change behavior, altering the system ought to be the means. If the goal is to decrease suicide, for instance, undertaking measures to enhance the social cohesion will be far more effective than hiring more psychologists.

- (2) A systematic lens is inevitably forward looking.

Viktor Frankl, in *Man’s Search for Meaning*, speaks of the horrific memories of a prisoner liberated from a Nazi concentration camp; “that looking back on his camp experiences, he can no longer understand how he endured it all” (pp. 114-115). Nonetheless, Frankl warns against bitterness, disillusionment, and what he refers to as “moral deformity.” To illustrate this worry, he recounts walking near a field of green crops after liberation, when a fellow prisoner “drew his arm through mine and dragged me through it” (p. 112). When Frankl objected, his friend shouted, “You don’t say! And hasn’t enough been taken from us? My wife and child have been gassed—not to mention everything else—and you would forbid me to tread on a few stalks of oats?” (p. 112).

Frankl is deeply saddened by his friend’s reaction. Of his friend, he says that the only thing that had changed with liberation is that, instead of being an object of willful force and

injustice, he had become an instigator. That is, instead of being oppressed, his friend was now an oppressor.

But what precisely, according to Frankl, are the harmful consequences of hanging on to bitterness and resentment? Frankl, who was an existential psychiatrist, argues that such a person is looking the wrong way! To create meaning in life, one must focus on the *future* (pp. 94, 95, 120). That is, one must focus on the gap between who one is and who one wants to become (p. 127). One must embrace what he calls tragic optimism (p. 161); one ought to accept that life *for all of us* is filled with pain, guilt, hardship and death, but that one, nonetheless, ought to say “yes” to life (p. 161). We ought always to use our creativity to turn life’s negative aspects into something positive or constructive, so that we become, what he refers to as, “attitudinal heroes” (p. 172).¹²

(3) A systemic lens is a great equalizer.

Writers who argue that the disadvantaged ought to resent the advantaged must anchor their position in the assumption that neither is responsible for the position that they find themselves in. If the disadvantaged were responsible, then they would be legitimate objects of approbation (not pity). Likewise, if the advantaged were responsible, then pride would be more appropriate than guilt. But if the advantaged are indeed not responsible because their preferable position is a function of the system rather than their actions as individuals, then neither pride nor guilt seem appropriate. Of course, if those in advantaged positions do not do their bit to make the system more just, then resentment towards those individuals might indeed be appropriate. But this is also true of those in disadvantaged positions. In other words, if the problem is indeed systemic, then it is the responsibility of everyone in the system to do what they can to make the system more just.

(4) A systemic lens diminishes interpersonal contempt.

In Malcolm Gladwell’s (2005) iconic book *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, he cites John Gottman’s 1980’s experiments with married couples to make a point about how barely-noticeable emotional responses can affect the longevity and health of one’s relationships.

In his experiments, Gottman found that there was one emotion capable of spelling doom for any relationship—contempt, i.e., a lack of respect for the other. This finding had wide-reaching implications not only for romantic relationships, but for all relationships of all kinds. If you begin to feel contempt for a person, the relationship falls apart, and conflict is bound to arise.

If one is not cautious, it is easy, and in fact natural, to focus one’s resentment and contempt on persons or tribes—fomenting conflict and war rather than cooperation. This poses a sizable challenge, since it is precisely cooperation that we need to reform a system. By adopting a systemic lens, individuals can redirect their contempt towards systemic problems that have resulted in unjust outcomes. In short, a systemic lens helps us all avoid unnecessary interpersonal conflict and allows individuals to focus their energies on larger, needed changes.

¹² Frankl’s position finds an echo in Spinoza’s Ethics. Spinoza makes the claim that there are three basic emotions: pain, pleasure, and desire (E3P11S). Hatred, fear and indignation fall into the pain category, or what Spinoza calls negative emotions (E3P18). Since humans seek to free themselves from pain (E3P12), if we hate something, we will try to destroy it (E3P28). We will, in other words, always have to have the vision of what caused us pain in the past in order to keep focused on what needs to be destroyed. Our fixation on, or obsession with past pain, will interfere with appetitive pull of a better future. As the band Broken Bells lament in their song *The High Road*, “it’s too late to change your mind, you let loss be your guide.”

8. Planning for small steps

In his book, aptly named *A Thousand Small Sanities* (2019), Adam Gopnik argues that we all ought to embrace a process whereby we move forward on the backs of *A Thousand Small Sanities*. The foundational belief of this practice, which he labels “Darwinian liberalism” (p. 57),¹³ is that humans are fallible (p. 26), and hence have difficulty foreseeing the rippling consequences of even small changes (note “the butterfly effect”), let alone the potential disasters inherent in an attempt at large-scale systemic overhaul. Gopnik recognizes, of course, that it is much sexier to advocate massive social renewal than the exigencies of small-step social reform (p. 168). On the other hand, he notes that we are remiss if we ignore what history has taught us; namely that catastrophic consequences can be expected to result from attempting to quickly engineer massive changes (pp. 40, 169).¹⁴

The characteristic that is distinctive of a Darwinian Liberal is the readiness to accept that social reform is *always* going to be essential. Each time we alter a society, new inequalities and injustices appear and are in need of remedy (p. 45); and that thus “a society, like a weekly magazine, is one long perpetual crisis. Solving this crisis long enough to get to the next one is the work we do” (p. 19). Gopnik helps us visualize the overarching theme by arguing that more dogmatic political visions are like unicorns, perfect imaginary creatures we chase but will never find. Darwinian Liberalism is a rhinoceros. It’s hard to love. It’s funny to look at. It isn’t pretty but it’s a completely successful animal (p. 14). Thus, though we cannot envision a perfect society, we can see bad when we bump into it. Fixing the imperfect—one imperfection at a time—is enough (p. 33).¹⁵

Echoing Gopnik’s sentiments is the work of Robert Paul Wolff (1998) who, in his book *In Defense of Anarchism*, argues that even though ideals such as anarchy are morally defensible, practical considerations in an anarchist state would result in the resurfacing of many of the same structures we frequently criticize. Wolff’s point is that while the desire to enact massive change is admirable, we ought to be cautious about large system overhauls, as we are highly likely to discard the best of what we already have. Churchill articulated a similar sentiment by noting that “democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried time to time.”

Before leaving this eulogy in defense of constant adjustment and change within the system toward a more perfect union, we ought to take note that the engine that keeps biological evolution in motion toward a more perfect union is fueled by a master value, namely survival. We ought to at least pause, then, to reflect on what will keep the systemic evolution going forward in a way that evolutionary rather than revolutionary. We suggest that resentment toward that system is just such a candidate, but that in order to be effective it must be combined with knowing how to engage in reasoned dialogue.

It is to that topic that we will now turn.

¹³ Echoing the notion that the continuing evolution is a result of thousands small incremental changes (p. 225).

¹⁴ Mao’s Great Leap Forward or Stalin’s collectivization programs.

¹⁵ Listening again to advice from Spinoza, our aims ought to be to understand, and intervene carefully to build institutions that foster empowerment in regular, imperfect, passionate humans. Our aims must be to improve and not perfect— since this is impossible (Tucker, 2018: 146).

9. Participant reactive reasoning rather than participant reactive attitudes

Thus far we have argued that we ought to be educating so that, in the face of injustice, individuals are more inclined to adopt a systemic rather than individual or tribal focus. Moreover, we have claimed that plans for systemic reform ought to be laid out in small steps that are amenable to continuous evaluation. The final ingredient that must be added is educating so that individuals develop the habit of engaging in what Stephen Darwell calls “second-personal” reasoning.

Second-personal reasoning requires that all participants recognize that it is the strength of the reasons offered, not the emotional force of one side or the other, that determine which position is deemed superior. It requires that all participants know how to articulate a reasoned, clear, precise position, how to estimate the strength of competing reasons, recognize that some strategies, such as ad hominem attacks, are illegitimate and so on.

But how can this be, one may wonder? Would we then be asking emotional beings who are saturated through with perception-skewing reactive attitudes to somehow miraculously transform into rational automatons? What has happened to the importance of freedom-inducing force of participant reactive attitudes, such as resentment?

The answer, we suggest, is that while participant reactive attitudes indeed signal that one views the other as capable of doing other than s/he did (one doesn't resent an apple for falling on one's head), merely flinging attitudes at one another is ultimately a surreptitious attempt to undermine the very freedom that is being recognized; it is often an attempt to manipulate the other (as one would any other object) into doing one's bidding.

Adding “objective” reason to the mix can help rectify this paradox. Thus, instead of merely exchanging participant reactive attitudes, we ought to engage in what Gardner elsewhere (2012) has referred to as “participant reactive reasoning”; i.e., that we all ought to be participantly reasonable (p. 258). This does not mean that we leave participant reactive attitudes locked at home so that we might engage in some Kantian rational Kingdom of Ends dialogue. Quite the contrary. “It is precisely because the rules of reasons are presumed to be ‘objective’ that we do not view each other as such because it is the ‘objectivity’ of the rules that frees us from determining bias, and it is this freedom that warrants non-objective or participant reactive responses. If you are committed to everyone playing by the rules, in other words, you must be prepared to call a ‘foul’” (Gardner, 2012: 265). Gardner goes on to note that,

In this light, we need to keep in mind, that since good/bad judgments that are rationally supported (though perpetually open to revision) are inherent to the process, blanket edicts that we all ought to love, tolerate, and accept one another “no matter what,” or that we ought to revere choices that are a product of isolated “reasoning,” whether universalizable or not, will shut this process down. “Respect for persons” requires neither that we love others nor leave them alone. Respect requires, rather, that we engage (p. 266).

So, it is perfectly legitimate for me to view your position as reprehensible, but when engaged in a reasoning process with you, my evaluation of your reasons must be objective. To do otherwise, is to put my own freedom under threat from my own freedom-destroying reactive attitudes.¹⁶

¹⁶ Thus, as evidence that objectivity is being trampled underfoot by the war of epidermises (Bruckner, 2020: 86), that people are making distinctions between “black reason” and “white reason,” Bruckner notes that “If a black person thinks differently from others, he thinks like a European, that is, he necessarily is “white,” a valet who is a ventriloquist, a traitor to his brothers. He is Bounty Bar, or an Oreo (p. 85).

We must not mistake being critical of others for critical thinking (Garrison, 2006: 13). Yes, we can be critical of others, but if we are serious about reasoning together in the service of making genuine progress in overcoming the obstacles that stand in the way of a better world, we must engage in critical thinking *with* one another, i.e., in evaluating the reasons with a critical view, we must not let our critical view of the other interfere with the process.

10. Conclusion

Many educators have been taught to treat resentment with kid gloves. Many may themselves be simmering with resentment or have students in their classes who are. Certainly, educators can expect that their charges are more or less hooked on social media and that, as a result, their classrooms will be swimming in simplistic black-and-white ideas of “victim and abuser, good and evil, and primitive notions of who is clean and unclean” (Todd, 2019: H3).

The price for leaving it be, or fanning the flames of resentment, are enormous. It may signal the end of the concept of humanity as “union in diversity” and the triumph of the human species as incompatible with each other (Bruckner, 2010: 86). For that reason, educators need to be courageous in making the case that resentment as a stand-alone attitude, while a perfectly natural response to injustice, in and of itself, may be a self-indulgent obstacle to cooperative change. It must become evident to resenters that the emotional energy of such an attitude can be harnessed to play a more positive role if (1) the focus stays firmly fixed on systems, (2) if action plans are formulated in small realistic steps, and (3) if all of us recognize that toxicity of resentment can be transformed into a catalyst for change by wedding itself to “objective” reasoning.¹⁷

Of course, we recognize that directing one’s resentment towards a system rather than a specific individual or group is not as emotionally satisfying as the self-valorization that comes with categorizing oneself as “being hard done by” by the corresponding “doer” (Benjamin, 2018). As well, resenting a system carries the implication that no one (including the resenter) can duck the responsibility for doing their bit to implement change. And then of course, there is the problem of “tribal membership”: refusing to echo the intertribal vindictives puts one in jeopardy of being alienated from those to whom one is closest.

Still, educators must persevere. They must not only not side-step the resentment that may be simmering in their classrooms, they must actively promote and oversee reasoned dialogical interchanges on precisely those topics that typically engender resentment. Politically correct but intellectually bankrupt classrooms can be avoided by adhering to the guidelines suggested above. And, importantly, educators must be prepared to articulate the other side of the argument if it is not forthcoming either due to the mix of participants or due to the fear of ostracism for voicing an unpopular position. In the long run, the guiding vision here is not so much closing in on an agreement, but rather creating a demonstration for all participants that deep meaningful reflective interchange can take place on topics that are either considered closed or inflammatory.

It is not an overstatement to say that the fate of the human species may rest on the degree to which we can overcome our tribal tendencies. Unfortunately, our very biology works against us—our bloodied history attests to this. Our self-indulgent self-satisfaction also actively works against us. Resentment works against us.

However, there is hope and that hope is carried on the shoulders of courageous non-politically-correct educators who are able to refocus resentment toward systems rather than

¹⁷ The “spirit is always composed of two contrary sides: it is kind of *pharmakon*—*at once* a good *and* an evil, *at once* a remedy *and* a poison . . .” (Stiegler, 2017: 10).

people, who consistently solicit doable action plans, and who oversee reasoned, meaningful, reflective dialogues on topics that are typically welcome mats for resentment, an attitude that, though it signals freedom, ultimately destroys it.

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